

News Articles

Congressman Bobby Bright: A Maverick Democrat in Republican Country

By Katherine Skiba

Photograph By J. Alex Cooney for USN&WR

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"Son, I wish you would go to the technical school and learn a trade. That's how we Brights support our families." - John Bright

Bobby Bright, a new Democratic representative from Alabama, was born to a sharecropper, the 13th of 14 children. As he headed off to junior college, his father urged him to reconsider his ambition.

Bright, who'd grown up picking cotton, instead plowed ahead. He toiled in one job after another and was barely on his feet when a dean interrupted one of his freshman classes. Bright needed to get home. His father had been in an accident. He asked if his father was OK. "No, son," the dean replied, "I think he's passed."

Bright cried all the way from Enterprise State Junior College to the family's \$12,900 home near Ozark, where the horrible crash came into focus. An 18-wheeler loaded with steel had taken a curve badly and slammed into his dad's car. The family breadwinner, who was then juggling three jobs by doing carpentry, driving a school bus, and working for a grocer, was gone.

Bright, 56, who took office in January, is candid about his hardscrabble past. No indoor plumbing. So few clothes that he and his brothers traded pants and shirts. So little cash that his dad used wire to breathe new life into his worn-out school shoes.

Bright kept walking: to college, graduate school, the police academy, law school, and, in 1999, election as the mayor of Montgomery. Along the way, he never lost his independent streak. Today he stands out as a new breed of Democrat, a

conservative from a ruby-red state who narrowly triumphed in the only regional stronghold the GOP has left-the South-as Democrats expand their big tent.

A Southern Baptist deacon, Bright opposes abortion. He favors gun rights and once, angered by a crime wave, urged Montgomery citizens to buy firearms, learn how to use them, and do so when necessary. He champions the military in a region that is home to big installations. He frowns on taxes.

In a Congress rife with people of privilege, he is rare for having labored as a ditch digger, roofer, prison guard, cook, hotel porter, financial adviser, and teacher before settling into practicing law. Whatever you do, don't ask him for a bailout. "I've never had anybody bail me out," he says. "I've never had anybody in my family who was wealthy enough to attempt to even talk to about bailing me out."

In Montgomery, the mayor's office is nonpartisan, and Bright was heavily courted by both parties to run for the House seat opening in 2008 because of Republican Rep. Terry Everett's retirement. The seat had been in GOP hands for 44 years. Bright threw in his lot with Democrats because they promised him more independence. That latitude has been on gaudy display, since he's bucked party leaders on every major vote, from the stimulus to health coverage for children to a pay-equity law named for Lilly Ledbetter, a fellow Alabamian.

House Democrat Artur Davis of Alabama, who recruited Bright, says that Democrats had enough votes to pass those bills and that it was plain from the start that Bright would not be a rubber stamp. Davis says Bright's positions on issues from gay rights to illegal immigration mesh with mostly rural southeastern Alabama. "He's the only Democrat who could have won in that district," Davis says.

In the GOP presidential primary, Bright backed Mike Huckabee of Arkansas. He won't say who got his vote November 4, but he was stunned when Barack Obama soon called, congratulating him and insinuating that he'd won not because of top Democrats but in spite of them. At first, Bright thought the call was a prank. He "stood straight up" and called Obama "Mr. President" when he realized it wasn't a joke.

Bright says Alabama Republicans played the race card in their bid to defeat him, plastering the district with black-and-white lawn signs: "Say no to Barack and Bright." He'd like to give one to Obama " 'cause it made it look like I was his running mate." John McCain ended up trouncing Obama in the state, 60 percent to 38 percent. When liberal House Speaker Nancy Pelosi hosted new House members at a bipartisan dinner in the Capitol last year, Bright was seated at her side like a trophy. He maintains party labels are meaningless, saying, "I'm truly America first and Alabama close second. I am committed to working with our commander in chief, and that is Barack Obama. If he is successful, our country is going to be successful."

With a 254-to-178 margin, Pelosi can afford some defections. It's the 49-strong "blue dog" Democrats, who are conservative deficit hawks, in the House who can give her heartburn. The dogs aggressively backed candidate Bright, and now he's joined their ranks.

Bright, in person, is friendly, folksy, and thoroughly Southern. When he speaks, it's "sharecroppah," for sharecropper,

and "hep" for help. He favors a black Ford F-150 pickup, grits, fried chicken livers, and, to let off steam, duck shoots. He's addicted to orange circus peanuts; he devoured 10 bags during his first week in Congress, by his count. And when he reaches into his candy jar and finds it empty, he's left to utter, "Oh, man. I'm out."

Asked how he transcended humble beginnings, Bright says he set incremental goals and worked hard, beginning with his first job off the farm at age 11. He kept the mayor's job until the day before he entered Congress, not remembering a day when he wasn't employed. "I'm a workhorse, not a show horse," he says. "You won't find anybody on the Hill who will work harder than me. My goal now is to be the best congressman Alabama has ever seen."

Southern Democrats once dominated the House, though their numbers began to erode in the '60s. That change means the House now has 72 Southern Republicans and 59 Southern Democrats like Bright, leaving the GOP to eye the new arrival who has staked a claim on their reliably red soil.

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